

A Wobbly report from Greece



A member of the Twin Cities IWW reports back from Greece.

Riots, general strikes, austerity measures, a vibrant anarchist movement, a threatening fascist resurgence... these are all words that come to mind when we think of Greece. I spent two weeks in Greece at the end of May with comrades from Eleftheriaki Syndikalistiki Enosi (ESE, or the Libertarian Syndicalist Union) in order to find out what life is like behind the headlines.

I found a country that is traumatized and scarred by two years of economic crisis, made much worse by a structural adjustment package forced on the country by the European Central Bank, the European Union, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Because of the cuts agreed to by the country's former "Socialist" ruling party, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), at least 20 percent of the Greek population is unemployed, wages are as low as €2 an hour, and workers sometimes go for six months or a year without being paid. Healthcare has been semi-privatized and homelessness and mental illness are on the rise. It's a bleak picture.

But I also found reason for hope. Greek workers are fighting back. My hosts in ESE introduced me to rank-and-file activists who are rebuilding the Greek labor movement from below; under the radar of the mass media and outside the now-broken framework of European social democratic labor relations, a new workers' movement is cohering.

There are many, many instances of workers reopening their businesses under workers' control after their bosses stopped paying them and closed the doors. In other cases, laid-off workers have formed cooperatives, mostly in restaurants and cafes.

Often this is just done temporarily to make back the money they were owed, and the new cooperatives do not break with the logic of the market and commodity production, but the prevalence of these examples is powerful proof that the spread of workers' self-management is an organic response to capitalist crisis.

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few or no paid staff; workers make decisions together, democratically and view collaboration with the state system of labor control with skepticism. Here's a quick summary of the unions I met with:

Courier's Union (Athens): Founded in 2004, this union has about 200 members, with an active core of 20-50 members. It organizes workers from multiple shops and uses picketing and direct action to win unpaid wages. It has no paid staff and low dues. It's a lot like the IWW. I met with them at length and discussed solidarity unionism and industrial unionism.

They are the linchpin of a new, alternative confederation that is currently forming in Athens.

Servers and Cooks Union (Athens): This is another group in Thessaloniki. It engages in many struggles over wage theft and has helped workers take over their cafes when the boss went out of business without paying them. Their most high-profile struggle was the worker takeover of an Applebee's in Thessaloniki around the New Year in 2010. The workers operated the business for one to two months after the boss suddenly shut it down.

Media Workers: One of Greece's six main network TV stations shut down suddenly in 2010, laying off 500 of its workers. They took over the station for one to two months and operated it as a workers' TV station, focusing on worker struggles. In the wake of the takeover, they have formed a cross-craft network linking workers throughout the production process at different media outlets, à la IWW.

ESE: Sort of the IWW equivalent in Greece, but newer. They are currently wrapping up a struggle over unpaid wages at an upscale bakery/cafe with three locations in Thessaloniki.

The boss has not paid the 100+ workers in about a year. A few of the workers started discussing taking legal action, and were fired right away. They came to ESE, which helped them develop a direct action and legal strategy. They held several aggressive pickets and plastered the town with posters denouncing the boss. ESE is connected to many of the new base unions and worker struggles that are emerging in the crisis, and continues to innovate tactics, strategy, and theory.

There have been many other struggles— a strike at the port led by a Communist Party of Greece (KKE) union, a strike by fuel truck drivers which shut down the economy, the occupation of a fertilizer plant in Thessaloniki. Some of these have won favorable settlements for the workers. However, there is no coordination between the workers directly because the Greek Communist Party and PASOK control the unions from the top down.

As most of the world descends into economic stagnation and crisis, there are powerful lessons we can learn from the Greek workers. Political reform in Greece, like in the United States, will not bring back social democracy. Rather than seeking to resuscitate an expired New Deal, we should build on the wave of workplace takeovers and push for a genuine industrial democracy. We should seek to dramatically hasten and expand the growth of new base unions and

worker committees, and infuse the movement with a revolutionary vision. As a new workers' movement grows in response to the crisis around the world, we should be immersed in it, seeking to expand its boundaries and deepen its content.

We believe another world is possible, so let's follow the example of our Greek comrades and start building it right now.

Originally appeared in the July/August 2012 issue of the Industrial Worker